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Pagnes, Georges
Uris, Leon
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FRANCE

The Sapphire Affair

One day in the spring of 1962, President John F. Kennedy gave to a special White House courier a note on his personal stationery addressed to French President Charles de Gaulle. In it, Kennedy told De Gaulle that he had good reason to believe that Soviet spies had penetrated the highest echelons of French government—perhaps even the Cabinet—and offered to let De Gaulle's representatives interview his source for themselves. The French counterintelligence agency, SDECE, conducted an investigation that lent substantial credence to the Kennedy contention—but somewhere along the line the investigation was called off and the matter dropped. This week the case comes to light again in the pages of LIFE, where Philippe Thyraud de Vosjoli, the former chief of French intelligence in the U.S., tells a remarkable story of Russian espionage penetration and French apathy.

Kennedy's source turned out to be a top-ranking defector from the KGB, Russia's ubiquitous security apparatus, whose French code name was "Martel." Martel's marathon debriefing in Washington by men from several NATO countries produced evidence that eventually unmasked some 200 KGB agents, including Georges Pâques, a Frenchman and senior NATO official, who was imprisoned. When members of the French SDECE began questioning Martel, they were startled by his claims. He said that 1) he had "information pointing to" the presence of a Soviet spy among De Gaulle's closest advisers; 2) at least five French agencies, including the ministries of the Interior, Defense and Foreign Affairs, were infiltrated by espionage agents; 3) a spy nest known to the Russians as "Sapphire" operated freely inside SDECE itself; and 4) KGB agents could deliver any NATO secret from Paris to Moscow within three days.

Sinister Forces. The French intelligence experts, says De Vosjoli, left ashen-faced from their sessions with Martel and reported home with the emphatic finding that Martel knew what he was talking about. But except for the arrest of Pâques, SDECE took no steps that Washington could see to flush out the spies. De Vosjoli's superior at SDECE explained that France could not stand a major scandal at a time when it was just recovering from the Algerian war, but De Vosjoli suspected that "other, possibly sinister, forces were the real reason for the inaction." He leaves open to speculation whether it was inside work by Soviet agents, suspicion that the CIA was using the affair to smoke-screen its own activity in France, or mere Gaullist pique.

In any case, SDECE suddenly and inexplicably did a turnabout. It told De Vosjoli to forget about Martel and to set up an apparatus in Washington to collect information relating to U.S. military and scientific matters, including U.S. deployment of ICBMs. When De Vosjoli argued that this course was foolhardy, he was upbraided by his superiors for having played a considerable part in helping the U.S. discover the presence of Russian offensive missiles in Cuba. Alarmed by Paris' new attitude toward the U.S., De Vosjoli resigned his post in disgust.

No Storm. Ironically, a fictionalized but transparent account of the whole affair, written by De Vosjoli's friend Leon Uris, has been on book counters for months in the bestseller *Topaz*. U.S. diplomats braced for a Gallic storm over it, but none materialized—perhaps because *Topaz* was not published in France. As of last week, all that the average Frenchman had read of the affair was some chatty, rather unalarmed accounts in the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* and a few other papers. Despite the Elysée Palace's determination to live above the tempest, it may not be able to maintain that altitude. The clear implication of De Vosjoli's piece is that the French intelligence agency and government may still be deeply penetrated by Russian agents.